

Climate change: University researchers feel powerless to take action, says survey

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University researchers in the UK, across all disciplines and at all career stages, are struggling to take action against climate change despite wanting to do so.

Many academics worry about [climate change](#) but face several barriers to changing their habits, including the pressure to travel. In one case, a climate researcher conducting fieldwork abroad wanted to use slower and more sustainable forms of transport rather than fly back to work at a research institute in Germany. [He was fired](#).

As large institutions and centers of knowledge, universities play an important role in tackling climate change. Their education and research have an enormous influence on society, but they are also large emitters—universities and further education colleges represent 2.3% of the [UK's carbon footprint](#).

Researchers can take [collective action](#) that helps universities address climate change. Given the right support, they could shape a future where research is more sustainable. But until recently, there has been little attention paid to how the culture and practices of universities either enable or inhibit change.

Along with colleagues, I [surveyed](#) almost 2,000 early, mid- and senior career researchers in 127 UK universities. We received responses from a mix of disciplines that were largely reflective of the UK's higher education sector. The results were stark.

What we found

Nearly all (95%) are extremely, very or somewhat worried about climate change. A similar amount (96%) want to do more about the problem in their university, not necessarily within the confines of their roles, but are prevented by high workloads, uncertainty over what they can do and a lack of agency or power to act.

The majority think their university does not give them enough information about how to conduct research in a sustainable way. Funding

processes, such as applications for grants to carry out research, do not incentivize low-carbon approaches either, they say.

One academic said, "I don't think anyone scores the carbon footprint of their grants (maybe we should)". They feel that the research culture of universities must change to better address climate change.

There is also a very high level of support for peers: 98% said they think it is appropriate for their colleagues to advocate for university action on climate change. Despite this, there is a great deal of uncertainty about what their peers actually think and do.

Almost half of the researchers we spoke to don't know if their colleagues see climate action at work as a priority, are unsure if their peers know how to address climate change or whether they are reluctant to do so.

Researchers clearly care about climate change, but they're not talking with each other about it.

Not just climate researchers

These findings are particularly striking because most of the researchers that we surveyed (65%) do not research or teach on climate change at all. The importance of climate action is evident to all types of researchers, not just climate scientists.

We found that barriers to taking action differed across disciplines. Climate researchers are more than twice as likely to feel they know how to address the problem and almost three times more likely to think their work can be part of that solution compared with non-climate researchers.

Those working in medicine, health and [life sciences](#) do not think their

subject area is as relevant for addressing climate change compared to those in other disciplines. That's despite the fact that there are [clear links](#) between health and climate change, such as the implications of heat waves and food insecurity.

Different barriers to climate action appear at different [career stages](#). Early career researchers in particular lack institutional support (such as job security or the encouragement to act), are involved in few projects about climate change (whether as part of research or outside of their roles) and feel uncertain about what they can do.

Mid-career researchers were more likely to complain of a high workload thwarting their ambitions. When asked if senior researchers should have a high responsibility for addressing climate change in universities, senior researchers themselves were more likely to think so than early and mid-career researchers, suggesting that they recognize their own potential role.

How to move forward

In the UK, [108 institutions](#) have made a commitment to divest from fossil fuels. Yet almost half of researchers think their universities are not doing enough and some are concerned universities are only paying lip service to the climate crisis. "It talks a lot about it in the university strategy," one researcher said. "But I don't know what [the university] is actually doing."

We found that most researchers think universities have a big responsibility for addressing climate change, along with the research councils that fund a lot of academic work. Researchers say they want to be part of that change and think universities would benefit from enabling this—but my colleagues and I believe it is essential that the responsibility is not made theirs alone.

To feel able to contribute to climate action, researchers say they need to know what actions to take, how their institutions will support them and space in their workloads to do it.

Our work offers some recommendations for how universities [could approach this](#). These include helping non-climate researchers feel confident to contribute their own expertise and ensuring the challenge to amend university culture and practices is taken up at the highest administrative level.

The UK higher education sector should take note and tap into the concern and motivation of researchers to be part of the solution.

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